

THE EFFECT OF COMMUNAL LIVING ON THE FAMILY

Middle class families can benefit from communes as much as single people. Today we find the media continually carrying stories about communes in the country, communes of university students, etc. But what about families who live in the city who have no desire to give up the technological advances of our society? Can they find anything of value in communal living? I think they can and it is because of this belief that my husband, my two children, and I are presently living in a commune in Montreal.

A commune can take on many forms. It can be large or small, it can take all the assets of all the members and divide them equally, it can work with equal contributions from each family, it can have its members working at the same task, or it can have its members all working in separate jobs. It can have a political purpose, a religious purpose, a social purpose, etc. In this article I would like to discuss my own particular situation as an example of how one commune works in terms of its social purpose.

The primary social function of a commune is to provide the opportunity to develop deep friendships. Modern urban living with each middle class family living in separate dwellings does not allow people to become friends easily. People are lonely.

They see their friends periodically at dinner parties and the rest of the time they use the phone. How can this kind of interaction possibly be fulfilling? It can't.

Most of you would agree with what I have said thus far but you would not agree that communal living is the solution. Let's look at some of the reasons you would probably give for this. The main thing which everyone values today is privacy. You would say that even though you are lonely at times it would be harder to have people around all the time. While it is perfectly true that everyone needs to have time alone and any good commune will protect this need in its members it does not follow from this that you need a whole house several days a week to be alone in. We have found that being able to retire to a bed sitting room is quite sufficient to satisfy our needs for peace and quiet.

Another question which probably comes into your mind about communal living is exposing yourself and your marriage to the close scrutiny of other people. One of the things we have found is that it takes time to be honest about your feelings but that it is absolutely essential to do so. We have weekly meetings to air specific grievances and have found these meetings to be very effective. Being able to admit to habits which are annoying for others and attempting to change these habits help us all to become more mature. Being honest about disagreements in our own marriage and seeing the natural expression of disagreements in another marriage help us all to accept turmoil and tension as a natural

part of every day living. Contrary to the belief that it would add more pressure to our life to expose ourselves to others we have found that the pressure lessens.

In our particular commune there are two families with two children each. We have kept the families separate in their sleeping quarters but we share everything else. Probably the ideal house for such a commune would be a home with the center being the livingroom, diningroom, and kitchen with bedroom quarters going off in opposite directions from the center. In this way up to four families could use the center communal area and yet retire to their own wing as they wished. We have found the large houses in downtown Montreal with three living floors to be a good alternative. The basement is a playroom, laundry-room, and carpenter shop. The ground floor has a livingroom, diningroom and kitchen, and upstairs there are five bedrooms. We have structured the house for quiet areas and lively ones to suit our own purposes.

Another question which we are often asked is: 'How are the children affected by this situation?' We found after an initial adjustment by the older children of both families that they are happier in the commune than they ever were in their separate homes. Because there are four children with a total age difference of three years they have several playmates. This is particularly important during long Canadian winters when parents of young children are forever having to arrange to have their

children be with other children by bundling them up and taking them someplace. But more than just having several playmates available we find that the children really love relating to more adults than their own parents on a day-to-day basis. For the adults too it is good to be close to more children than your own. Even though we are relating to more children than before living in the commune we have found that the emotional demands of our own children towards us have lessened.

Another advantage of communal living is what I call the return of spontaneity. As any parent knows, the years when all activities depend on procuring a babysitter, spontaneity is practically destroyed. In a commune it returns again because of the presence of more than one family of adults. We can go to the movies at the last minute, out for a walk, and now we are even going away for weekends while the other couple stays home. If we all want to be out then the cost of a babysitter is shared.

The sharing of expenses is another obvious advantage of communal living. One large home shared by two families is less expensive than two small ones paid for separately by each family. I could list savings indefinitely but the major ones after home owning are appliances, food, and media services.

Nonetheless, it would not be worth the saving if the people living together did not really like each other and like the communal life. We were all nervous at the beginning of our

commune but have since come to realize how far-reaching the benefits of this way of life are. None of us want to return to the 'one family one house' world. Most of our friends wish they could find people they are compatible with. As with marriage you take a chance, and as with marriage when it works, the benefits of a deep friendship cannot be measured.

One final aspect of communal living I would like to mention is the effect it has had for us on husband and wife roles. In many communes the traditional roles of husband working outside the home and wife inside are still found. This is particularly true of rural communes. It is of course up to the preferences of the individual members and should be talked about before moving together. In our own particular situation, however, we have found a relaxation of the traditional functions. The men have found themselves willing to cook, wash dishes, etc., for everyone when before they were hesitant to do so for their wife. Similarly, the women have begun to repair things, use the electric saw, shovel the sidewalk when before they waited for their husband to do them. The traditional roles tend to disappear so that we end up doing what we are good at and sharing the jobs that no one likes.

One of the consequences of this sharing is that we all have more time. Cooking two times a week for 8 people takes less time than cooking 7 times for 4 people. The person who cooks does not have to do the dishes. Only one person has to write the checks. And so on. Again this benefit really only matters if the basic mood of the commune is happy. As everyone knows if the members of

a family are troubled about something then any work done for the family is unpleasant.

In many ways a decision to enter a communal life can be seen as an attempt to return to the philosophy of the extended family. The nuclear family is being criticised from all sides and many people advocate its complete breakdown. There is a tremendous danger in my mind which is associated with this kind of a breakdown. The danger is that people will substitute short term relationships for long term relationships. They will have many acquaintances instead of a few life-long friends. It is my experience that the people who chose this path never conquer their loneliness. They end up at 50 looking for new friends much in the same way as a teenager at a new school. So I would recommend an opposite solution for the inadequacies of the nuclear family. Find people you like, move in to a large house together, begin to share, discover the pleasure of good friends. Instead of turning away from commitment turn towards it. The family will be enriched because of it.

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